

Behavioral Science and Public Policy

PPHA 31941

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This document provides a **high level overview** of the course. It is **not** the syllabus. Assignments and topics are subject to change before the start of the quarter.

You can find last year's syllabus here: bit.ly/BSPP2024syllabus

(You must use your UChicago account to access it)

COURSE OVERVIEW

Many policies are aimed at influencing people's behavior. The most well-intentioned policies can fail, however, if they are not designed to be compatible with people's underlying motivations and the way they process information. The objectives of this course are twofold: (1) to learn some of the psychological underpinnings of everyday decisions and behavior (and their implications for policy) and (2) become familiar with a range of behavioral interventions (including "nudges") that may be especially compatible with the way people think. The ultimate goal of this course is to prepare you – as future policy makers, program managers, consultants, and advisors – to be effective agents of change.

The course will address questions such as:

- How might the way people process information affect their receptivity to new ideas?
- How might policies and programs be better structured to enhance their likelihood of uptake?
- What types of motivations other than economic incentives can be used to motivate change?
- What types of interventions can be used to "nudge" desired behaviors, in ways that are compatible with the way people process information?
- How can you be a more effective policymaker or advisor by being aware of your own expertise and the biases that accompany it?

We will explore these questions through in-class discussion, reading reflections, and written assignments.

The course is organized into two halves, each with two sections:

1. Understanding humans as information processors
 - a. Basic mechanisms
 - b. Types of information processing and common mental shortcuts
2. Exploring strategies to create supportive informational environments:
 - a. How to structure the environment to encourage desired behaviors (often through "nudges")
 - b. How to communicate information more effectively and persuasively.

The first half of the course focuses on how people process information – and in a sense, answers why we can't just "educate" people if we hope to change their behavior. The second half of the course explores ways that as policy advisors, we can structure the environment to be more supportive of desired behaviors and help people act on their intentions. Some of the interventions

we will examine may be familiar to you as “nudges,” although most existed in the psychological literature long before that term came to be!

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Explain the processes and biases that underlie much of human decision-making.
2. Evaluate (and improve) existing policy interventions using psychological principles.
3. Understand and apply behavior change strategies to practical problems.

COURSE FORMAT:

Classes will be a mix of lecture and discussion focused on topics presented in the readings. You are *highly* encouraged to participate in class or via Canvas Discussion boards. The course is designed to be broadly relevant to policy, without delving into the specifics of any one policy area. You will get more out of the material the more you try to apply it to the topics of greatest interest to you.

COURSE MATERIALS

You can expect 2-3 readings per class. Starting in week 3, a select number of readings will be drawn from the one required book: Kahneman, D. (2011). Thinking, Fast and Slow. All other readings will be provided on Canvas.

Course topics at a glance

Wk	Topic	Topic
1	Course Overview; Our Ancient Brains	Mental Models: Basic units of cognition
2	Limits of Attention	Sharing Information I: Avoiding Overload
3	Sharing Information II: Challenges of Expertise	Thinking Automatically: Systems 1 & 2
4	Heuristics – the Big 3: Availability, anchors, and representativeness	Status Quo bias, Loss Aversion, & Endowment effect
5	Failures of Follow-Through: Habits, Temptation, and Self-Control	IN-CLASS MIDTERM
6	Behavior Change frameworks	Incentives & Extrinsic Motivation
7	Social Norms and Comparisons	Commitment and Planning Devices
8	Reminders & Prompts	GROUP PROJECT DAY
9	Persuasion	Emotional appeals; Course wrap-up

Overview of Course Assignments

Assignments are subject to change before the start of the quarter

PARTICIPATION & ATTENDANCE **(5%)**

You are encouraged to participate in the course by offering insights, asking questions, and sharing relevant examples from your own experiences. Participation can happen in many forms, including by asking questions or making comments in class or by responding to others' comments and questions on Canvas discussion boards. The more you make an effort to engage, the more enjoyable the course will be.

READING REFLECTIONS **(5%)**

To help ensure quality class discussions, you are expected—five times during the quarter—to post a reflection on the readings (300 words max.) to Canvas **by 11:59pm the day before class.**

MEMO TO DECISION-MAKER **20%**

In this memo (900 words max.), you will use what you have learned about human information processing to provide guidance to someone else about a specific situation of your choosing. The goal is to help your memo recipient learn something about human information processing that will aid them in more effectively communicating, designing, and/or implementing some program, policy, product, or service. The objectives of this exercise are to (1) help integrate newly gained information with your existing knowledge, and (2) give you practice communicating ideas with an audience that does not share your same level of expertise.

IN-CLASS MIDTERM **30%**

The midterm will test your ability to explain and apply behavioral concepts to policy-relevant scenarios. We will work through similar examples in class before the exam.

BEHAVIOR CHANGE INTERVENTION – Group Project **(40%)**

Everyone will take part in a group project (3-4 people) that will involve designing a behavior change intervention to address a policy problem of significance. Note – the focus is on individual-level change – not the behavior of organizations or institutions. Through a series of three assignments, you will: (1) identify a behavior to influence, (2) investigate potential motivations and barriers that are relevant to that behavior, (3) pitch an intervention strategy to your classmates, and, with their feedback in mind, (4) write a proposal for your intervention. These steps closely follow the process that behavioral science consulting firms use in their practice.